

hoods because families were being kicked out of public housing and scattered to other neighborhoods, as real estate developers pushed in. In fact, Renaissance 2010 targeted many of the same areas as the sweeping “Plan for Transformation”—another Mayor Daley scheme that was demolishing public housing to make way for private, “mixed-income” developments, forcing residents to move out in search of landlords who would accept housing vouchers.

As soon as school enrollment dropped, finally allowing for optimal class sizes, CPS would pull teachers out. “We were like, please keep teachers in the building!” said Caref. “We need more adults in the building!”

Duncan’s slash-and-burn approach, together with CTU’s tepid response, spurred teacher activists to form the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators and push to take over the union.

By the Numbers

Educators

CTU is the third-largest teachers local in the U.S. Its 27,542 members, as of November 2013, included:

- 5,380 high school teachers
- 13,710 elementary teachers
- 3,066 paraprofessionals (including teacher assistants, school clerks, and many others)
- 162 school nurses
- 267 speech pathologists
- 866 clinicians (such as social workers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and school psychologists)
- 3,826 retirees.

According to district figures, 25 percent of Chicago teachers were African American, 18 percent were Hispanic, 49 percent were white, and 3 percent were Asian/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, as of January 2012.

Students

The Chicago Public Schools enrolled 404,151 students as of January 2012. Forty-two percent were African American, 44 percent Latino, 9 percent white, and 3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander.

Eighty-seven percent were from low-income families, and 12 percent had limited English proficiency. ✪

3

Rank and Filers Start Doing the Union’s Job

Despite losing nearly 20 percent of the union’s members to the Renaissance 2010 scheme, CTU’s old guard leaders never had a plan—or the spirit—to fight the closings.

“There were all these attacks on the schools, and the union was basically silent,” said math teacher Carol Caref. She joined a union committee on Renaissance 2010, but it didn’t go anywhere.

When Englewood High was on the chopping block, history teacher Jackson Potter and other teachers and parents organized to stop the closure. But instead of pitching in, union higher-ups told Potter he should look for another job—and when he and other activists raised their voices in hearings, they were hushed by union officials.

Finding the union unhelpful, activist teachers began looking elsewhere for allies. They found each other—and like-minded community activists—and began to work together. The group that coalesced over a period of several years would become the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE).

It wasn’t initially about running for union office; it was about saving their schools. But the alliances established in these early fights would support CORE members through their 2010 election, the 2012 strike, and beyond.

The teacher activists and the community activists agreed that racism and gentrification were behind the closings. The teachers “were willing to partner with neighborhood folks because that’s who they had the most in common with,” said education organizer Jitu Brown of the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO), an early ally in these fights.

Saving Bronzeville Schools

It was KOCO activists who led the first major fight against Renaissance 2010—and their success led teachers to seek them

out for advice. The city moved in summer 2004 to implement the program's first phase, the Mid-South Plan, which proposed shutting down 20 out of 22 schools in the historically black Mid-South (Bronzeville) section of the city. (Kenwood and Oakland are neighborhoods in the Bronzeville area.)

KOCO organized a coalition of community members, Local School Councils, and activist teachers. (Local School Councils, or LSCs, existed in each Chicago school, composed of two teacher reps, six parents, two community reps, and the principal, plus a student rep in high schools. The councils have the final say on the school's budget and on hiring of the principal.) Together, this coalition was able to ward off the initial round of closures by packing city meetings, pressuring the district's alderwoman, and marching on the school board president.

But the Bronzeville schools weren't the only ones on the chopping block, and KOCO's organizing know-how was immediately in demand. Brown soon met Jesse Sharkey (who later became CTU's vice president), a history teacher on the North Side fighting the conversion of Senn High School into a military academy. They talked through the organizing strategies KOCO had used to halt the Mid-South Plan.

A Neighborhood Worth Preserving

Bronzeville, on the south shore of Lake Michigan, was once known as "Black Metropolis" and a national hub of African American culture. Sam Cooke, Louis Armstrong, and Muhammad Ali all lived there. But as industry fled Chicago in the 1970s and '80s, the area lost much of its population and plunged into poverty. Now professionals are moving in, and working-class residents are worried about being priced out. University of Illinois at Chicago professor Rico Gutstein called Bronzeville "one of the most gentrified communities in Chicago." (Even the Obama family lives nearby, at the cusp between Kenwood and Hyde Park.)

According to Jitu Brown, the Mid-South Plan was a calculated attempt to destabilize the neighborhood's working class black population and replace local black schools—despite their more than adequate performance—with selective charters that would cater to the young professionals, many also African American, who were moving into the neighborhood. ✧

Brown also began to work with Potter, who later became CTU's staff coordinator, and Michael Brunson, who was then teaching at a school in the country's oldest public housing project, on the South Side, and later became recording secretary.

Potter was a young history teacher and debate team coach in a low-income black neighborhood on the South Side when in 2005 CPS announced plans to phase out Englewood High. He quickly became a leader in the fight to save the school, working closely with Brown and KOCO to organize student walkouts.

Potter also met high school teacher Xian Barrett, and the two began meeting with their students to collaborate. "My students at Julian High School got really into the Englewood fight," Barrett said, "because we could see the writing on the wall that we were the type of school that would be targeted next."

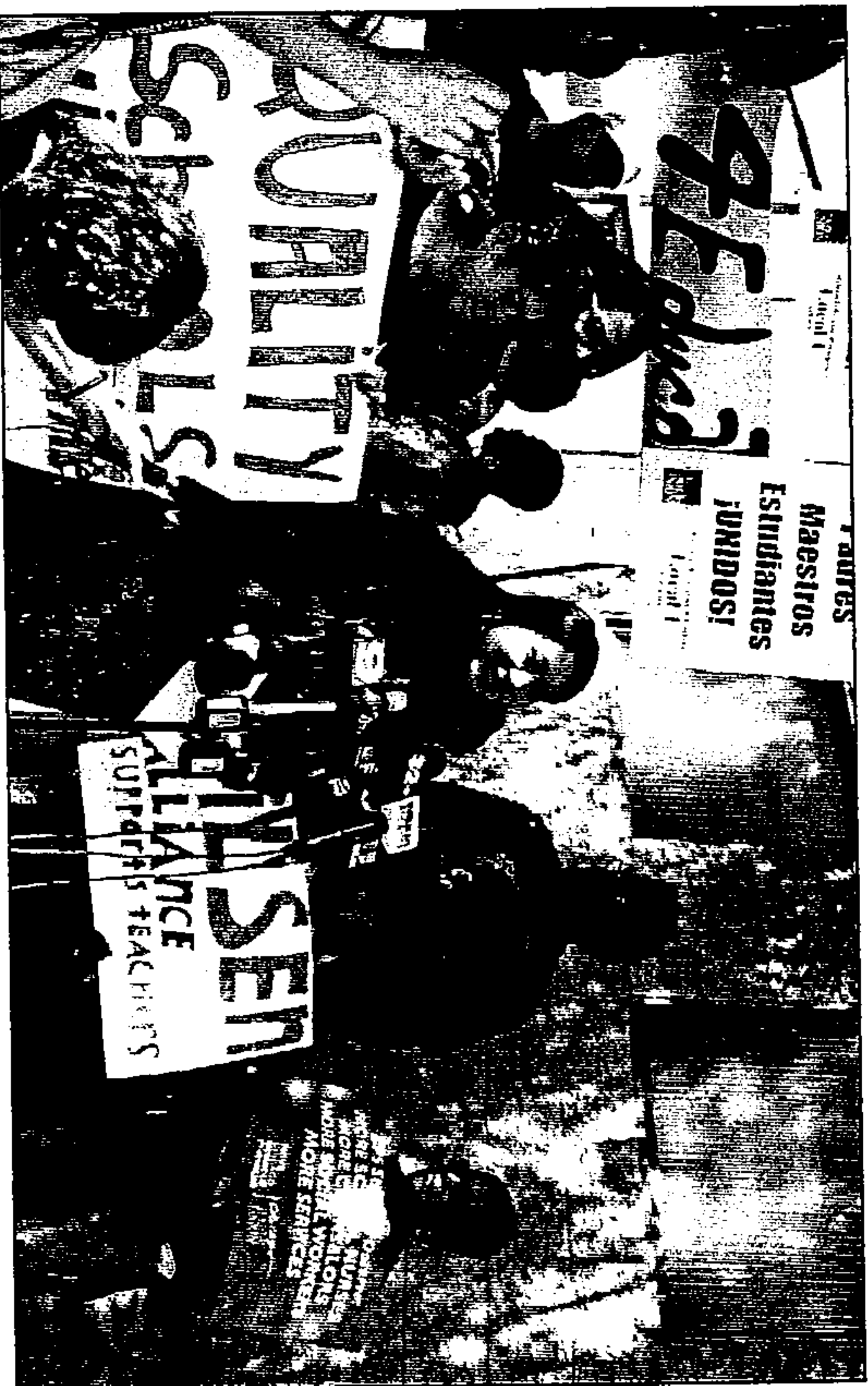
Not all these struggles produced wins as in Bronzeville. Englewood did eventually close, replaced by two new schools, one a charter. The naval academy did take over a wing of Senn High. And 2004-05 was only the first volley in the coming war over mass school closures. But that was all the more reason the growing relationships and organizing skills would be crucial.

Potter also served on the board of the Pilsen Alliance, which had formed in 1998 to defend Pilsen, a working class Mexican-American neighborhood on the Southwest Side, against an onslaught from developers. The city was taking tax dollars that should have gone to schools and funneling them to developers through "tax-increment financing" (TIF).

On paper the subsidies were supposed to promote job-creating industrial development in Pilsen—but there was nothing to stop the money from flowing to new condos and big-box retailers instead. The Pilsen Alliance organized against TIF financing for Target and other big-box stores, bringing Potter into coalitions with community organizations like the Grassroots Collaborative and ACORN.

'Who Wants to Talk?'

Over the next couple of years, as teachers and community activists fought side by side to save schools, the union's leaders continued to be unsupportive. Activists pushed them to create a union committee to counter Renaissance 2010. "We cajoled them



Sarah Jane Rhee, loveandstrugglephotos.com

for a couple months,” said Potter, and “they said yes. We got good at putting demands on union leadership together with community groups.” But in spring 2007 the union dismantled the committee.

For years the old guard of CTU had given lip service to working on education issues with community groups. But such coalitions often fell flat, largely because of union leaders’ halfhearted participation. “In the old days, CTU really had to be brought kicking and screaming,” said Rico Gutstein of Teachers for Social Justice, a local activist group with an anti-racist perspective.

“You always hear how labor works with community to get what they want, and then they leave,” said Brown. “That coalition began to fall apart because folks didn’t feel a commitment from the union to stand with us on the issues that impact our lives.”

To make matters worse, CTU leaders were busy fighting each other. Things came to a head in 2008, when the president sought to have the vice president dismissed for financial impropriety, particularly lavish spending on meals and gifts. The vice president accused the president of similar spending. When the previous reformers were voted out in 2004, the union had had a \$5 million surplus; now it had to cope with a \$2 million deficit. “While teachers suffered from massive job cuts,” said Al Ramirez, a teacher at Ruiz Elementary, “their leadership was not asleep at the wheel—they were joyriding.”

Kristine Mayle, later elected CTU’s financial secretary, was

Pilsen. When she learned in early 2008 that De La Cruz was slated to close, Mayle worried what would happen to her students, who benefited from the school’s award-winning programs for special needs students.

She also worried about her own uncertain future. This was her first job in the district. As a young, untenured teacher, she would be on her own to find a new job if the school got shut down.

She was furious at the lackluster response of CTU’s old guard leadership. It was hard to get them to send a representative out to the school to calm nervous teachers, she said, let alone oppose the closing. “We called the union and they basically just told us to get our resumes together,” she said.

But someone else did show up at De La Cruz to talk about fighting back. “They dropped some flyers in our mailboxes and said they wanted to have a meeting,” Mayle recalled, “then showed up after school one day and said, ‘Who wants to talk to us?’”

It was Norine Gutekanst, a third-grade bilingual teacher at a nearby school, and a couple of members of the Pilsen Alliance. “When we saw that De La Cruz was on the list, it was just natural, since it was our community, that we went over to see how we could organize the community to try to stop it,” Gutekanst said.

“It was the beginnings of CORE,” said Mayle.

Organization started to gel when Potter and Ramirez pulled together a meeting of about 20 people, borrowing the United Electrical Workers hall. Ramirez, a longtime union delegate (steward), had worked with Potter to make a documentary about the school closing fights. In the process, “we started running into other people who were ready for something, ready to fight back,” said Ramirez, who would become CORE’s co-chair.

Jen Johnson, a young history teacher and delegate, remembers, “It wasn’t laid out what was going to come from that meeting. They figured this was the next step, to get more people involved in a new way.”

The group decided to keep meeting and before long had adopted a name. “We weren’t talking about running for office at that point,” Johnson said. “We were thinking maybe we can get more people involved, we can help file grievances, involve community partners, show a different way to fight school closings and draw on the traditions of community work.”

“My personal sense was that there were some really experienced leaders in the room. They were doing things people in my building weren’t talking about.”

Study Hall

You might expect no less from teachers: one of their early activities was to form a study group, with the goal of understanding the issues and the players, in order to fight more successfully.

“I went to a study group to figure out what was going on in school closings in Chicago,” said CTU’s future president Karen Lewis, then a chemistry teacher. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard the ‘there’s nothing we can do’ mantra. These teachers were talking about actually forming resistance.”

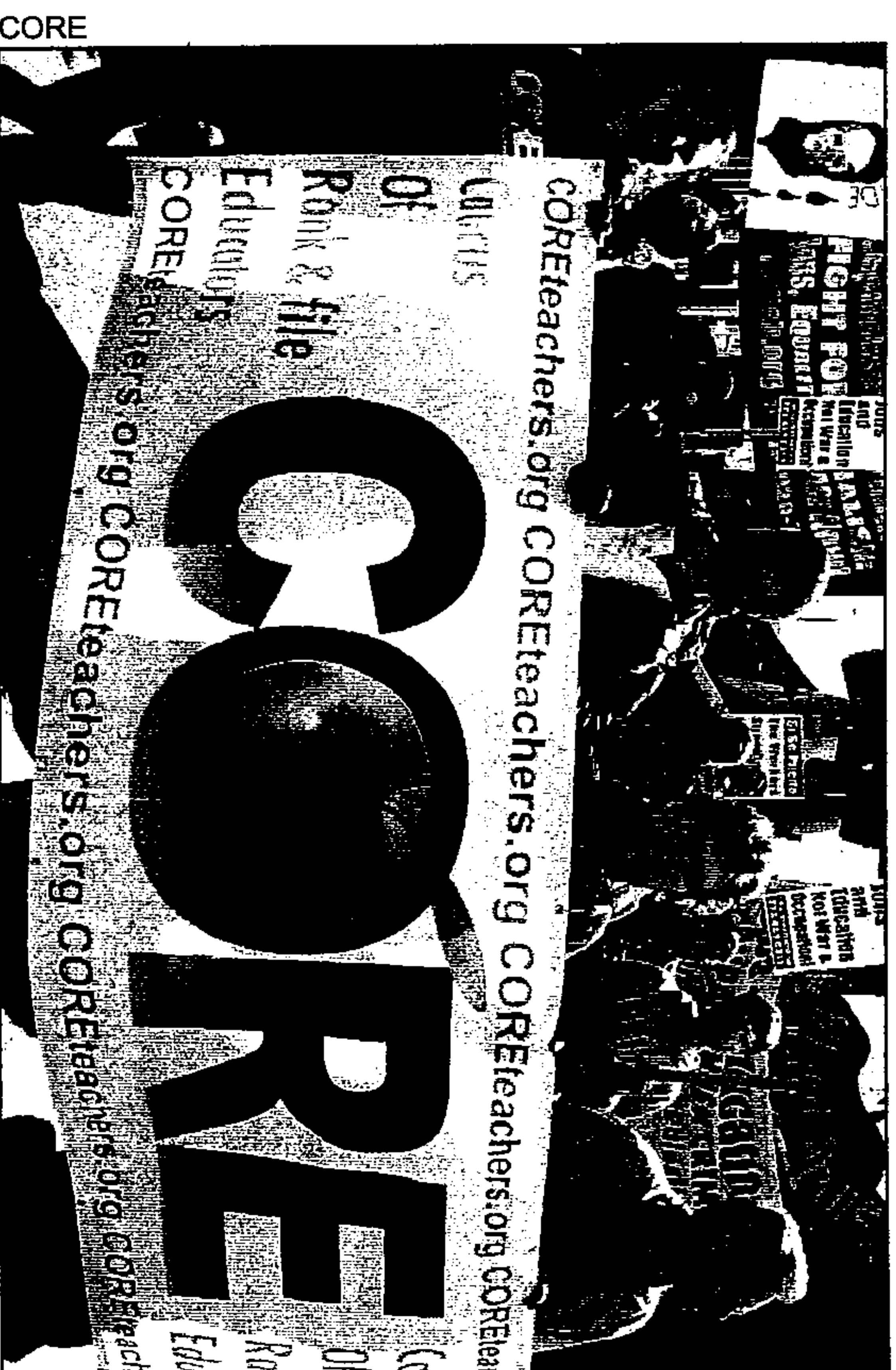
One of the group’s first and most influential readings was Naomi Klein’s 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, which describes how the New Orleans elite seized upon the opportunity of Hurricane Katrina to fire all 7,500 of the city’s teachers and hand over the majority of its schools to private charter operators. “I think the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina,” Secretary of Education Arne Duncan would later confide.

Klein argued that the rich and powerful use crises—whether real or mostly hype—to frog-march the public towards goals they would otherwise never agree to. The connections weren’t hard to see, as waves of “crisis budgeting” were used to push charterization in Chicago.

The teachers also studied their union contract and the Renaissance 2010 plan. They read a Ph.D. thesis on the history of CTU. They read a piece called “Rethinking Unions,” from the activist magazine *Rethinking Schools*, which argued for teacher unions to go beyond self-interest and embrace social justice unionism. And they read the newly published pamphlet *Hell on Wheels: The Success & Failure of Reform in Transport Workers Local 100*, about a rank-and-file caucus that won leadership of New York City’s bus and subway union.

School of Hard Knocks

Although some of the teacher activists had worked together for years, the group was “very open and welcomed new people.”



recalled Bill Lamme, a social studies teacher who came to early meetings. He saw himself as a peripheral member at first, focusing his political energies on social justice activism with his students rather than the union. But he was impressed to find such smart, experienced people interested in getting something done together, not self-promotion.

The teachers “developed a collective body of knowledge,” Lamme said. “They developed a group with a focused and common view of what had happened. They built themselves; they didn’t just bring together disparate individuals.”

It wasn’t all readings. Among them, teachers in the group had years of knowledge and experience, which they systematically shared. Many were union delegates, veterans of fights within the union and with management, who had developed organizing skills and a solid understanding of what they were up against.

Some had been involved in PACT, a reform caucus that had held the CTU top officers’ jobs from 2001 to 2004. So the group studied that experience and asked leaders from PACT to speak at a meeting. One of the key lessons: sentiment against the incumbents might be enough to sweep you into office, but it was not enough to transform the union once you got in. Veterans of that fight were wary of rushing into another electoral campaign. Instead, they stressed the importance of building a strong and

independent caucus with active members in as many schools as possible.

Some in the study group were long-time socialists who knew the history of rank-and-file movements in other unions. And Potter's stepfather, Pete Camarata, was a founder of Teamsters for a Democratic Union. Members of the study group talked with local TDU activists and met with teachers union reformers, too—the Progressive Educators for Action Caucus, part of a coalition that

Starting from Scratch

Jim Cavallero had been a delegate for four or five years—a pretty disappointing experience.

"I was going to House of Delegates meetings and trying to bring information back to people, but there wasn't much to bring back, to be honest," he said. (The House of Delegates is the monthly meeting of representatives from each school.) "People in my school were starting to see the union as a waste."

And action? Forget about it. "I'd never been to a CTU rally," Cavallero said. "I'd never even heard of a CTU rally."

But he wasn't willing to give up. When he saw an article about a new caucus forming in the union, he recognized the author: Jesse Sharkey, someone he knew from the House of Delegates. "I tended to agree with the things he said," Cavallero said—so he went to the first meeting, liked what he heard, and got involved in CORE.

On the day-to-day level at his school, what did that mean? "Instead of me coming to people saying, 'This is what the union can and can't do for you,' I started saying it more as, 'What can we do? What can you do to be more involved—can you do this, can you attend this?'" Cavallero recalled. "Not just looking at the union as Merchandise Mart [the downtown commercial complex where the union had its headquarters], but asking what we as union members could do ourselves."

"And people did buy into it. It was a slow process, but they did. I had a lot of one-on-one conversations, and a lot of small group conversations with two to three people, trying to get them to come to a CORE event, or something one of our allies was throwing.

"When I started to see a change is when CORE ran for union leadership, and people started hearing the things Karen and Jesse were saying. They realized that was the kind of union they wanted: one where membership was involved. Not just trying to fight for a salary. Trying to fight for public education; trying to defend teaching as a profession." ✧

took leadership of the Los Angeles teachers local in 2005, and the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican reformers had won leadership of their union, broken from the American Federation of Teachers in opposition to concessions, and in 2008 led a militant strike in defiance of a ban on public sector strikes.

CORE Goes Public

The teachers started spreading the word about CORE online with a June 2008 announcement. "CORE is a group of dedicated teachers, paraprofessionals and other champions of public education. We hope to transform our Union into an organization that actually fights for its members," they declared. "All of our jobs are on the chopping block with 400 teachers fired this year alone... What is our union leadership doing? CORE is fighting to stop these attacks on teachers."

The announcement laid out "a proposal for change that we hope you will help us develop and fine-tune," listing a four-point agenda: wages, improved benefits, better working conditions, and job security. Those sound like traditional bread-and-butter union issues—but under "working conditions" the new caucus included class size, high-stakes testing, an elected school board, and working with parents and students. Under "job security," ending school closings topped the list, and CORE proposed taking job actions and building a strike fund to stop the spread of charter schools.

The group planned a "Fight for Public Education" public event with Jinny Sims, past president of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation. B.C. teachers had struck illegally for two weeks in 2005, attracting the kind of community support CORE saw as vital—and winning smaller class sizes as well as a raise.

Gutekanst was impressed with the listening tours BCTF had sponsored to hear from parents and community members. The union "really connected with what were people's concerns, and what were their desires and hopes for education in the province," she said. About 25 people came out for a daytime meeting, and 75 in the evening. "We weren't talking about striking so much," Caref said, but about how Sims's group had "influenced the union to move in a more fighting, social justice direction."

CORE wasn't running for office yet, but it wasn't shy about

criticizing the incumbent administration. The caucus helped organize a protest at CTU headquarters, demanding the union “stop the crooks and open the books,” and calling for greater transparency and accountability to members.

Going to Every Meeting

The fledgling caucus decided to focus on fighting school closings. Although CORE was small and made up of volunteers with full-time jobs, the group committed to attend all school board meetings and closure hearings to speak out.

“Once we started going to board meetings, it totally changed the character of who came out,” said Caref. “We went to every school closing hearing, every charter school opening, every board meeting, and we said ‘No. Stop now,’” said Lewis. Each time they announced themselves as CORE, more members joined, especially from schools under attack.

Mayle and others had fought the closure of De La Cruz in 2008—they had students write letters to the board of education about what the school meant to them and present them at the school’s closing hearing. Ultimately they lost, but they did win an extra year of phase-out, so students could finish middle school there in 2009 instead of having to transfer.

So Mayle’s role at the hearings she attended was to prep everyone else—parents, students, and school staff—to “give them a sense of what was going to go down, what talking points worked with the board.” Even when this didn’t produce new CORE recruits, Mayle said, “we were the force showing that there were still people willing to fight.”

Special education teacher Margo Murray first got involved with CORE this way. She was fighting for the therapeutic day school where she worked. “This was a school serving black troubled youth, children with severe behavior problems, who needed therapy,” she explained. “The CORE people were there, and I was like, ‘Wow, I don’t have to do this by myself.’” Teachers and parents were able to stop the school from closing that year.

‘These People Are Solid’

The individual relationships many of the teachers had formed through their activism allowed organizational relationships with

community groups to develop organically.

“Initially people may have been a little hesitant to work with CORE due to the perception that they were young and inexperienced, but the fact is they were serious. They made up for their lack of experience with a fervor that was youth,” said KOCCO’s Brown. People in the community organizing world would call him up, asking whether they should go to CORE meetings. “I’d say, ‘Yes, these people are solid.’”

“The old CTU leadership never thought about the parents, ever. It was just bread and butter, take care of the members,” Mayle said. “We realized our natural allies were the parents. It’s super obvious. I don’t know why anyone else didn’t realize it.”

A new coalition, the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), began to come together. In addition to CORE it consisted of KOCCO; Teachers for Social Justice; the Pilsen Alliance; Blocks Together, a community organization based in the Latino neighborhood of West Humbolt Park; Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE), a city-wide parent group; Designs for Change; and others. The coalition also included “a hodgepodge of occasional Local School Council presidents and members, depending on fights that were going on,” said Potter.

“I remember a very long retreat trying to work out a mission statement for GEM that took all day,” said Mayle. “The whole thing worked on consensus, true consensus.” The group committed to democratic principles in education, the rights of every child, and the idea that schooling should “prepare students to deeply understand the roots of inequality and be prepared to act to change the world.”

GEM became an important vehicle for mobilizing against the cuts and closures, organizing large protests that brought thousands to the streets in opposition to the school board’s plans. Later the groups in GEM became the nucleus for CTU’s Community Board (see Chapter 6).

Summit in a Blizzard

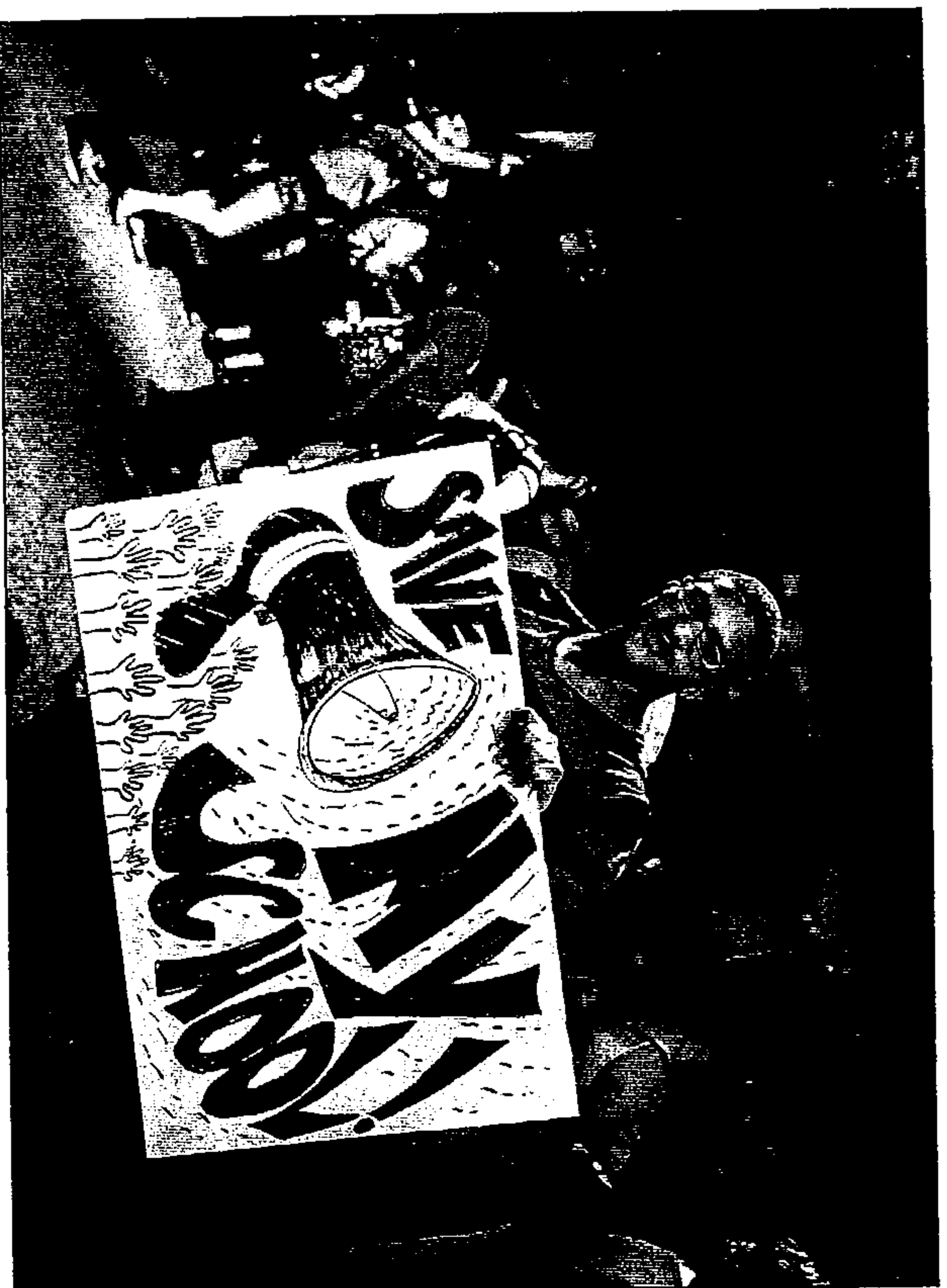
In January 2009, just months after the caucus formed, CORE sponsored a citywide “Education Summit” with the help of the groups in GEM. The summit served as a kick-off event for two months of intense organizing against impending closures.

Despite a driving snowstorm, more than 500 people showed up, representing 81 schools—far more than the 100-200 people organizers had anticipated. The crowd talked about closings, firings of veteran teachers, special education, student discipline, and how teachers and community members should work together.

The city had announced plans to close 22 schools in the next year but not said which ones. Right before the summit, the coalition's tireless meeting-going paid off. At one of the meetings, a parent organizer from Parents United for Responsible Education got hold of the closure list—"so we were able to announce the schools closing at this meeting," Mayle said. "We were the source of information for everybody."

Organizers had tried to ensure that each panel included a student, parent, or community member—not just teachers. Former charter school teachers and students exposed the myths about what was happening in charters. The momentum was so great that even CTU's administration felt compelled to participate, so CORE gave President Marilyn Stewart a speaking slot on one of the panels.

That forum was the moment the CORE activists realized their power, according to Johnson. "If 500 people can show up in the middle of a blizzard, then I think we are tapping into something that is real," she said.



Sarah Jane Rhee, loveandstrugglephotos.com

Riding the momentum of the forum, GEM crystallized, and with its partners in CORE "began to mount some pretty intense fights against school closures" in early 2009, Brown recalled. The pressure was making the union's top brass pay more attention to the closures. "We invited the CTU leadership to join GEM," Lewis said, "and they came to a few meetings to learn how to organize."

In between citywide events, CORE activists were making connections with teachers, students, and parents school by school, helping them get organized to fight locally. "They brought their experience of how you do a campaign," Lamme said. "How to organize a demonstration, write a press release, confront the board at a board meeting—strategies for building your movement within a school." CORE didn't just build up a few charismatic individuals; instead, the caucus grew by helping more people develop leadership and organizing skills. "They stood behind people, not in front of them," Lamme said.

In late January, hundreds marched on a board of education meeting—opposing the 22 closures and demanding a moratorium on all closings and "turnarounds" (where the entire staff of a school is fired). The following month, CORE and community groups camped outside the district's downtown offices, keeping vigil in tents through the freezing February night. And the next day, hundreds packed a board of education meeting while hundreds more rallied outside. The coalition won a major victory, forcing the board to keep six of the 22 schools open.

But after the six schools were saved, the union leadership stopped working with GEM. "After the photo-ops ended, so did the union's active participation," reported Kenzo Shibata, an English teacher who later took charge of new media for CTU.

At CORE's convention in April, members held workshops and agreed on the group's principles. The caucus members chose five: a member-driven union, transparency and accountability, education for all, defense of publicly funded education, and a strong contract.

Discrimination Complaint

CORE continued to study the role of race in Chicago schools. As Caref remembers it, during a conversation about how the closures overwhelmingly hit African American students in high-pov-

erty areas, someone pointed out that the district might also be targeting those schools to get rid of black teachers. "I said, 'Let me look that up, because I'm a research person,'" Caref said. She checked out the state statistics and sure enough: "When you compared the number of African American teachers at turnaround schools, before and after turnaround, there was a huge drop."

So in June 2009 CORE filed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint, on the grounds that turnarounds had a disproportionate impact on black teachers. Since 2002, the percentage of African American teachers in CPS had dropped from 39.4 to 31.6—a loss of 2,000 black teachers. "Essentially, a 'turnaround' constitutes a layoff policy that almost exclusively impacts African American teachers," CORE charged.

Wanda Evans, who taught at Orr High School for 11 years and had been nominated for teaching awards before it was turned around, said she felt "swept right out of the door." She suggested the turnaround plan was designed to save money by replacing senior teachers with lower-salaried new ones. "I'm completely offended by the way veteran teachers have been treated," Evans said. "It's like a fast food special: let's get a 2 for 1."

Socialize to Organize

"I went to my first CORE meeting before I ever went to a union meeting," high school teacher Adam Heenan said. He was invited by Xian Barrett, whom he met at a service-learning program in summer 2009—wearing a CORE T-shirt.

CORE held its meetings at Manny's Deli in those days. "We ordered food and talked about issues," Heenan said. "I was surprised by the way everyone let each other talk and gave their opinions. I hadn't really seen this before." Though busily organizing, the caucus was also still doing movie screenings and reading circles.

"I was impressed," Heenan said. "I said, 'I want to do this. I want to be a part of this. I want to get good at this.'" He took the lessons back to his school building, where he became an associate delegate and later head delegate.

Key to the delegate's job, in his view, is getting members involved in solving problems at their worksite—and getting them to socialize with each other, too. "My thing has always been 'socialize to organize to mobilize,'" Heenan said. "You can't expect people to march in the streets together if they don't even know each other's names." ✧

CORE didn't end up winning the complaint, but the action was a foot in the door to start talking about the connection between school closings and racism—and to get veteran black teachers involved in the caucus. Under its old leaders, CTRU had developed "a bad name in some of the black communities," Gutstein said. "What CORE has done is to concretely take up the struggle of the black community in particular."

When Arne Duncan came to speak in Chicago that month, CORE held a protest. "We had the statistics about the number of black teachers losing their jobs due to school closings," remembered Johnson. "We carried signs that were black outlines, the head and shoulders in black, to represent them."

After CORE activists reported via Twitter that they had been threatened with arrest for trying to enter, a flood of teachers responded with solidarity messages, offers to send bail money—and requests for directions to the picket line.

Issue by Issue

The caucus took up fights on other issues in the schools, too, such as the "20-day rule" that allowed schools to open or close positions 20 days into the school year. This was a way for the district to save money by adjusting to actual enrollment levels. But the savings came at the expense of a rocky start to the school year for students who would endure weeks of substitutes or overcrowded classes, or cope with program changes when their teacher was laid off.

"Does it really save money," Caref asked the board of education, "or does it just shift expenses to summer school or after-school programs which might not have been necessary if the school [year] had gotten off to a good start?"

CORE launched a campaign in the House of Delegates, successfully petitioning the union to hold a special meeting to debate the 20-day rule. The ruling caucus managed to block a vote, but CORE intensified its own public campaign on the issue.

The caucus also came to the aid of staff battling a bully principal. Prescott Elementary Principal Erin Roche was handing out record numbers of disciplines and terminations for weird reasons, in an effort to get rid of veteran teachers. One teacher was told

she was fired for closing the blinds, among other “instructional weaknesses,” *Substance News* reported; Roche was apparently convinced that “‘research shows’ children learn better in the sun.” Teachers said Roche wanted to start charging tuition for Prescott’s free pre-school program, to drive out the low-income Latino students; the neighborhood was in the midst of gentrification.

CTU members at Prescott reported that their union reps weren’t helping them fight the harassment, instead advising that they find another job. So CORE and another opposition caucus teamed up to organize an afternoon picket, drawing 50 teachers, parents, and students, on the day of a Local School Council meeting in June. Days after the picket, district officials finally held a meeting to hear from teachers at Prescott and two other schools with problem principals.

CORE also began reaching out to reformers elsewhere, establishing the beginnings of a network. In summer 2009, a delegation traveled to Los Angeles to meet with reformers from L.A., New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. (For more on the network that would grow from these beginnings, see Chapter 11.)

Time to Run

By the time the 2009-2010 school year rolled around, the writing was on the wall. With little more than a year under its belt, the caucus was already doing much of the work union leaders should be doing—but without its resources. “CORE decided if we were going to make a real change, we needed to take back control of the union,” said high school teacher Adam Heenan.

Originally, “we just wanted to change the way things were done,” Lewis said. “We thought we were making some progress because the president of the union came to some forums we held. We thought, ‘Oh, this is great, we’re going to see some fundamental change.’

“When that didn’t happen, we decided we should run.”

Lessons

- ⇒ CORE began doing the work of the union long before being elected.
- ⇒ Like-minded teacher activists found each other through action—fighting school closures—not just at union meetings. CORE sent an activist to every single school closure hearing.
- ⇒ The caucus developed alliances by working together with community groups as equals, not just asking for assistance with its own predetermined goals.
- ⇒ CORE activists were united by more than just their opposition to the incumbents. Through reading, conversations, and actions they developed a shared point of view.
- ⇒ CORE attracted new recruits by tackling issues teachers cared about. Filing a discrimination complaint, for instance, helped the caucus reach out to African American teachers who’d had reason to mistrust the union in the past.
- ⇒ CORE made activism enjoyable and welcoming to new recruits by making social events part of what members did.
- ⇒ Teachers with no prior experience learned how to organize by joining CORE’s discussions and actions. As they shared their skills with other new recruits, CORE grew and could take on even more activities.